AUTOCASTRATION OR REGICIDE? LUCIAN, *DE DEA SYRIA* 20

The king of Assyria has ordered his friend Combabus to accompany queen Stratonice to the Holy City, and there to help her to build a votive temple to Hera. Immediately realising the jealous suspicions to which this situation could give rise, Combabus begs the king not to force the task on him, but without success. Eventually Combabus decides to castrate himself as a means of protection against future charges of sexual misconduct. The soliloquy which he delivers immediately before his drastic action ends with the following words (ch. 20):[1]

νέος μὲν ἐγὼ καὶ γυναικὶ καλῇ ἔψομαι. τὸ δέ μοι μεγάλη συμφορὴ ἔσσεται, εἰ μὴ ἔγωγε πᾶσαν αἰτίην κακοῦ ἀπωθήσομαι· τῷ με χρὴ μέγα ἔργον ἀποτελέσαι, τό μοι πάντα φόβον ἰήσεται.

What are we to make of the phrase μέγα ἔργον? In her commentary (n. 1), p. 405 Lightfoot compares Herodotus' use of the expression (both in the singular and the plural) to refer to the accomplishments of 'kings, tyrants, heroes in war, or massive forces in nature'. Under this interpretation, the phrase ironically represents Combabus' horrific act of self-mutilation as a 'great deed'[2] comparable to mighty conquests (cf. Hdt. 1.14.4, 1.59.4),

I am grateful to Professor Donald Russell for helpful comments.

[1] The text is that of J. L. Lightfoot (ed., transl., comm.), *Lucian:* On the Syrian Goddess (Oxford, 2003) (itself a μέγα ἔργον if ever there was one), p. 260 lines 11-13. I do not mention the small textual variants in the passage, which do not affect my argument.

[2] Cf. Lightfoot's translation 'therefore I must do a mighty thing that will eradicate all cause for dread' (her commentary (n. 1), p. 261). So also J. Elsner, 'Describing self in the language of other: pseudo (?) Lucian at the

brilliant generalship (cf. Hdt. 3.155.6), or heroic acts performed in the thick of battle (cf. Hdt. 8.17, 8.90.3). The lofty language is half-humorously deflated (I nearly wrote 'undercut') by the grim reality of the act which follows; yet at the same time the undeniable bravery of Combabus' deed is also recognised by the narrator.

There may be more than Herodotus lurking in this expression, however. In several places in the *Odyssey* (3.261, 11.272, 12.373, 19.92, 24.426, 24.458)[3] the phrase μέγα ἔργον is found with a set of meanings whose significance is quite different from that outlined above. It may refer to an act of great violence (for example, 24.426, the killing of the suitors), of wanton humiliation aimed at another person (19.92, Melantho's verbal attack on Odysseus), of deliberate disobedience of the divine will (12.373, the slaughter of the cattle of the Sun), or of transgression, albeit unintended, of some basic norm (e.g. 11.272, the marriage of Epicaste to her son Oedipus). The phrase is also used in similar senses at Hes. *Theog.* 209-10, Pind. *N.* 10.64 and Aesch. *Pers.* 759-60, but given the concentration of occurrences in the *Odyssey* it is fair to assume that Lucian's audience will have felt it as a specifically Homeric usage. In this meaning the phrase is always found in the singular. In each case there is a powerful sense of the violation of the proper order of things, often through an act involving excessive violence or cruelty. This gives a sentiment which fits well in the mouth of a man on the verge of unmanning himself, given that the act of castration is

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temple of Hierapolis', in S. D. Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge, 2001), 123-53, at 147: 'he made himself imperfect by performing (literally "perfecting") a "great deed" upon himself'.

[3] Cf. M. Bissinger, *Das Adjektiv ΜΕΓΑΣ in der griechischen Dichtung* (Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft 10; Munich, 1966), 203.

such a fundamentally violent attack on the proper wholeness of the human male. More generally, the Homeric flavour of the phrase is entirely appropriate in this narrative context.[4]

There is, of course, an important distinction between the Homeric use of the expression[5] and the use which we find in our passage: namely, that references to a μέγα ἔργον in this Homeric sense are not made by the person who performs the act.[6] This is hardly surprising, given the negative connotations of the phrase. Rather, it is most commonly used to condemn the act in question, and is often set in the context of a claim or prediction that vengeance will come upon its perpetrator as a consequence (cf. *Od.* 19.92 ἔρδουσα μέγα ἔργον, ὃ σῇ κεφαλῇ ἀναμάξεις, 24.426 with τισόμεθα at line 435, 12.373 with τῖσαι at 378, Hes. *Theog.* 209-10; also *Od.* 3.255-61, where the vengeance is hypothetical). Yet despite these threats, the perpetrator of a μέγα ἔργον usually does not stop to consider the likely effects of his actions and the punishment to which they may lead.

Lucian's handling of the expression effectively exploits some of these Homeric resonances, though in an unexpected way. Combabus' violent and transgressive act, far from suggesting his insensibility to the prospect of imminent vengeance, is aimed precisely at the

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[4] Lightfoot points out how in this passage 'the vocabulary owes more to epic than any other section of the treatise' (her commentary (n. 1), p. 398). For other examples of Homeric colouring in the immediate vicinity see Lightfoot's notes on ὦ δείλαιος, τῆς τέλος ἤδη δέρκομαι and τῷ με χρή (all p. 405).

[5] In this and subsequent references to the 'Homeric use' of the phrase I do not mean to imply that this is the *only* sense which this expression can have in Homer.

[6] Contrast however Soph. *Aj.* 422-3 ἔπος / ἐξερῶ μέγα, spoken by Ajax: though given Ajax's delusional self-promotion this is very much the exception which proves the rule. On this use of μέγα and *magnum* to qualify nouns other than ἔργον in a negative sense see the note in my commentary on Soph. *El.* 830 (Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries, forthcoming).

avoidance of a likely future punishment. Far from being a morally reprehensible act, it is designed to protect its perpetrator from even the mere suspicion of wrongdoing. Yet at the same time, this prophylactic against punishment paradoxically constitutes one of the most horrible punishments imaginable: cf. especially Hdt. 8.105.1, where the castration of Panionius and his sons as a punishment for Panionius' involvement in the eunuch trade is regarded by the historian as the μεγίστη τίσις … πάντων τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν. The fruitfulness of such a comparison between the Homeric and Lucianic contexts of the phrase points towards the probability that this Homeric sense for μέγα ἔργον in this passage was indeed felt by Lucian's audience. The phrase thus appears every bit as grimly ironical as when taken under its Herodotean aspect.

The phrase is also significant for the nature of Lucian's narrative technique in this passage. We do not learn that Combabus is contemplating self-castration until the moment that the act is performed, immediately after his monologue comes to an end. The vague language of this soliloquy (cf. εἰ μὴ ἔγωγε πᾶσαν αἰτίην κακοῦ ἀπωθήσομαι and τό μοι πάντα φόβον ἰήσεται) gives no hint of his likely course of action. The referent of μέγα ἔργον is thus not at first clear. Few, if any, of Lucian's audience would have understood it to denote autocastration. Given the context, it is more likely that the phrase would have been taken as a reference to a pre-emptive strike against the king on the part of Combabus. That would be an obvious course for a subject in this desperate situation: more obvious, certainly, than the bizarre choice of voluntary self-castration. The phrase μέγα ἔργον in its Homeric sense helps to point us in that direction, since it constitutes a natural designation of the act of regicide, and in fact is used to refer to this crime at *Od.* 3.261 (Aegisthus' killing of Agamemnon).

The parallels between this episode and the Gyges narrative from Herodotus 1.8-14 lend further, stronger support to this view.[7] There too we see a confidant of the king (1.8.1 ἀρεσκόμενος μάλιστα (sc. τῷ βασιλεῖ); cf. *DDS* ch. 19, where Combabus is said to be one of the king's φίλοι) who is brought into deadly peril as the result of too proximate an encounter with the wife of his ruler. There too this encounter takes place because of the specific encouragements of the king, against the protestations of his reluctant subject. In each case, the subject is forced to compromise himself, and as a result turns to desperate measures. The similarity of situation, along with the deliberate ambiguity of the phrase μέγα ἔργον, could easily have led a reader or listener to expect an attempt by Combabus to do away with the king before the king could do away with him. In the event, this turns out to be a false narrative path: and so the sudden reference to castration immediately after Combabus' monologue comes with greatly accentuated shock value.

The two interpretations offered by Lightfoot and by me need not, of course, exclude each other. Lightfoot herself has offered a sensitive analysis of Lucian's polyvalent use of the ἔργ– root in this narrative (p. 398), and so it is not surprising that this phrase here can carry more than one meaning. Both need to be appreciated for Lucian's artistry to be fully understood.

All Souls College, Oxford P. J. FINGLASS
patrick.finglass@all-souls.ox.ac.uk

[7] The connexion between the two narratives is noted by G. Anderson, *Studies in Lucian's Comic Fiction* (Mnemosyne Supplement 43; Leiden, 1976), 79 and by Lightfoot (her commentary (n. 1), p. 399).